

THOUGHTFUL THREADS: ETHICAL FASHION

GEETANJALI RAMESH CHANDRA & IMAN LIAQAT ALI

Assistant Professor, Amity University Dubai, Ms Iman Ali Liaqat,

Student Amity University Dubai, United Arab Emirates

ABSTRACT

The thoughtful thread title has been derived from a conscious brand, “thread 4 thought”, which inspire authors to think about Eco ethical fashion and the thought behind the threads. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding, towards eco-fashion and how far does ethical fashion contribute to the wellbeing of the society. This paper includes the eco-criteria, for a sustainable fashion production and the importance of ethics and value creation. Fast fashion has been a common trend and has been researched on and analyzed to show, what are its effects on society. Initiatives for an eco-fashion business has been introduced, while also discussing the essential ethics in the production like CSR, EPR, green washing, eco-labels, fair trade fashion and animal ethics. Due to complexity in business productions and supply chains, the importance of transparency has been discussed, along with the appropriate use of eco-marketing. The data has been collected through both primary and secondary research, to give a meaningful insight on the topic. Resources such as books, journals, magazines and the internet have been used. A survey was also being carried out, to analyze the behavior-gap in eco-clothing field.

KEYWORDS: Eco-Fashion, Sustainable, Ethics, Value, Fast Fashion, CSR, EPR, Green Washing & Transparency

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INTRODUCTION

The global apparel market is valued at 3 trillion dollars, 3,000 billion, and accounts for 2 percent of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The fashion industry includes many sub industries, such as menswear, women's wear and sportswear. Compared to the food and cosmetics industry, the fashion industry seems to be less bothered on the impact it has on the environment and people. This is perhaps because they have rarely been questioned about where they manufacture their products or source their fabrics and are they adopting sustainable and ethical practices. And since the very beginning, the industry of fashion has been a tale associated with exploitation of both the resources and stakeholders. It is the increased awareness in consumers that creates a demand for ethical products and drives firms to adopt sustainable practices. And in order to compete in an already saturated fashion industry, the creation of eco-fashion has emerged as an alternative for fashion brands to stand out. To what extent does ethical fashion contribute to the well-being of the society? How far can firms be successful in adopting sustainable practices? To what extent does sustainability play a key role in consumer purchasing decisions?

ECO CRITERIA

Calling a fashion product ethical or sustainable means it possesses some distinct quality, and in order to identify those features, there are several criteria's to differentiate the product, some of which are as follows:¹

- **Animals Right:** products that are made without the use of animal skin (i.e. Leather) or their tissues, instead made from recycled or man-made materials.
- **Ethical Production:** demonstrates respect for people and the environment.
- **Artisans/craft:** hand-made products, like embroidery, that appreciate and preserve talents and ancestral traditions.
- **Demi-couture:** or otherwise known as made-to-order, that encourages high quality over mass, fast, cheap and disposable production of fashion.
- **Fair Trade Certified:** this certification ensures that certain international standards are met like for labor rights (such as reasonable work hours and pay, no child labor, etc.), environmentalism and social policies.
- **Organic Certified:** ensuring natural fibers have been grown without the use of pesticides, chemicals and other toxic substances thus preserving the health of humans and the environment.
- **Recycled:** existing materials, fibers or fabrics have been reused to produce new garments, while preserving quality.

ETHICS AND VALUE

The word “ethic” is derived from the Greek word “ethos” which means character. Ethics deals with a certain standard of morals and conduct, and is an indirect governing force behind every human behavior, be it individual or organizational. An ethic direct human behavior and helps to differentiate between what is right or wrong, proper or improper and fair or unfair.

The concept of business ethics comes from the belief that every profession is bound by certain ethical principles and moral standards which reflect its responsibility, dignity and authority. A business should not be allowed to conduct itself in a manner that may be detrimental to the interest of society or the business itself. Some of the basic principles of business ethics which may be followed by a business enterprise are prioritizing service over profit, satisfaction to customers, well-being of community and environment, dignity of human labor, efficient utilization of inputs and business and the business must be socially responsible.²

Ethics are nothing but the philosophical basis for making choices considering morals and values. Taking up environmental and social responsibilities while designing would mean adding value and result in outcomes such as increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, increase in sales and profitability and lower manufacturing costs. These values can be installed by decreasing their environmental effects of fiber cultivation, manufacturing, logistics and use phase and product disposal stage. While the design process has a great impact on the use phase of the product it is important to design the product according to the sustainability principles before manufacturing.

¹Eco-Criteria by Eco Fashion World and Ethical Fashion

Just the way as designers can create value of the product, they can even destroy it by ever-changing trends and fashion that quickly outdated products and make them valueless. Although the product may give a positive experience to the consumers, simultaneously, it may destroy something valuable, like craft skill, and this is exactly what can be seen in the current era, known as Fast Fashion.

FAST FASHION

Fast Fashion is a term given to low-cost clothing that mimics high-cost luxury fashion trends, following a fast-response system that encourages disposability. Where a design took almost six months to reach from the catwalk to consumers is now a matter of few weeks. Fast fashion companies, like H&M and Zara, rely on fast cycles: small batches, greater variety, more efficient transportation and delivery and floor ready merchandise. In order to keep customers coming back, high street retailers regularly purchase new trends and replenish inventory.

Fast fashion has increased customer satisfaction due to low cost, latest designs and quick response time in meeting consumer demand. Along with higher profit margins, fast fashion chains are growing faster than retail fashion industries.

On the other hand, fast fashion brings about a lot of ethical issues. Hand-made, expensive, unique and luxurious products are longer what consumers want to know as there are cheaper products giving the same utility. Where patience once used to be a virtue, prevalence of fast fashion builds desire in consumers to obtain trends as they are in. Secondly, fast fashion is too disposable. The idea of “ten washes” has come from fast fashion companies, after which an item is no longer expected to retain its original value. Companies pay no price for such consequences, and neither do the customers regret replacing these clothes by disposing the old ones. Outsourcing is one of the major causes of their lower costs and usually labors’ rights are neglected by poor working conditions, unfair wage pay, child labor, etc.

Fast fashion, with their fast production, not only hurts our resources, but also employs less people, as these processes are usually highly mechanized.

Not all consumers appreciate the concept of fast fashion. Especially those possessing partial or complete knowledge on the workings of fast fashion disregard it as unethical due to the potential harm it brings to the society and the environment.

Although fast fashion may be able to emulate luxury products, they may not be able to achieve the deeper elements of value attained by luxury items such as high ethical standards in sourcing, efficient use of raw materials, low or nil negative environmental impact, availability of repair and upgrade services, and most importantly, best quality.

INITIATIVES FOR ECO-FASHION BUSINESS

Currently our fashions industries are based on fast cycles of production, swiftly changing trends and planned obsolescence of fashion-some of the major contributors to unsustainability. As the price of a product falls, producers increase their production to meet the increasing demand and maintain profitability. Consequently, stock is accumulated in bulks and markets are saturated. To start an eco-fashion business, it is necessary to study the tastes of consumers in order to instill sustainable practices in production. They must also be able to plan how to transform societies into sustainable ones, to find sustainable business practice as an opportunity and not an obstacle.

² Chaturvedi, Illa, Business Environment, Delhi: Ashok Galgotia, 2013. Print

One of primary concern of manufacturers is the disposal of fabric scrap, which contributes to the large percentage of the production waste. So they have to come up with new ways of effectively reusing and recycling these excesses. For an instance, Levi Strauss has come up with an innovative method to recycle their scrap by using it to make their company letter paper. Many manufacturers are also changing their packaging for shipping and are no longer using polyester bags or Styrofoam.

As globalization prevails, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become important to adapt. Moreover, the consumer's trust may only be achieved through proper communication of the sustainable/ethical practices at all levels of production, which means avoiding "greenwashing" practices.

Sustainable business must be seen as a new challenge and opportunity for creativity and not as a hurdle. Businesses must work sincerely in value creation by considering those values proposed by the consumers, environmental aspect as well as by creating a strong bond between the business and its stakeholders. This will lead towards incentives and initiatives to a successful eco-fashion development.

ETHICALITY IN PRODUCTION

CSR

Corporate social responsibility (CSR), also sometime known as corporate responsibility, corporate sustainability and corporate citizenship, is a concept that applies to those businesses who consider the interests of society by taking responsibility for the impact of their business decisions and activities on consumers, employees, communities and environment. It is a general agreement that a business must adopt a wider perspective (i.e. Social, environmental and ethical issues) when setting their objectives and not just aim only at profit making or expansion.

As consumers and other stakeholders are increasingly reacting positively towards businesses that act 'green' or socially responsible, adopting CSR means a firm can maintain its reputation, earn consumer interest and thus higher profits.

There are certain internationally recognized CSR principles, recognized by the UN as the "Global Compact" that gives guidelines to a corporate towards sustainable practices. These are the ten principles that are categorized under four headings: Human Rights, Labor, Environment and Anti-corruption. Increased globalization makes subcontracting necessary, especially for large scale business operations. As not everywhere is the legislations strict, or at the level with internationally recognized CSR principles, it is the responsibility of the business to work in collaboration with the subcontractors to ensure they follow the code of conduct through effective communication on the goals and requirements on sustainability.

Sustainability and CSR require constant evaluation and commitment, and it is essential for all the departments of an organization to commit to the sustainable practices and execute them in production plans.

EPR

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is a concept that requires the original producer to take back the product after use. Just as a producer is responsible for the waste generated during production, he is equally liable for the environmental effects after discarding the product.

This means that the producer must plan strategically in the design phase in order to reduce the environmental

impact of the product after its use and bring to use the second time. This process is known as “Reverse Logistics”, where the material flow from the end users, back to the producers for the purpose of capturing value by reusing, recycling or redesigning or proper disposal.

Greenwashing

As the concerns about the environment are rising and demand for environmentally friendly products are increasing, businesses may be tempted to use sustainable and environmental aspects, merely to increase sales. With the use of deceptive green marketing and conveying a false perception that company’s policies, practices and products/services are eco-friendly, it is pretty easy to mislead consumers. These companies can use certain phrases to market their products such as “sustainable”, “eco-friendly”, “green”, “organic”, etc. This practice is well known as “greenwashing”, derived from combining the words “green”-environmentally sound and “whitewashing”-to gloss over wrongdoing.

A more holistic understanding is needed to avoid greenwashing. For an instance, by using eco-labels on its products or using paper bags instead of plastic bags, a fast fashion company won’t change its fashion system; the company’s impact on the environment is still huge since it produces a lot in very fast cycles. It is the business’s values that have to be grounded, deeply in sustainability and should be implemented at all stages of production.

Thus, it is important that all claims of a company on its environmental initiatives must be proven. In this regard, eco-labels are more preferable than a company’s own environmental claims.

Eco Label

Eco-labels certify a product to be environmentally friendly. There are private and public organizations providing third-party eco-labelling, who assess a product life cycle under pre-set categories of parameters, set by qualified experts.

The concept of eco-labelling emerges due to increased concerns on the environmental impacts of a product during production, consumption and its disposal - especially in case of fashion industries. By being qualified for an eco-label, firms can create a value for their product and hence anticipate positive consequences. They can promote their products through various authentic environmental claims and labels such as eco-friendly, recycled, natural, and recyclable, etc. that grabs the attention of consumers. But now that businesses feel that just declaring their products to be ethical is not enough to lure consumers, they use the method of “greenwashing” that, sometimes also leads to confusion and doubt amongst consumers. Thus certified eco-labelling ensures consumers that, a company has been checked for its ethical claims and sincerely follows the Eco principles.

Fair Trade Fashion

Fair trade fashion is a social movement that promotes sustainability and securing the rights of workers through better working conditions and reasonable pay and encourages the manufacturers to demonstrate more equity through transparency and respect.

Fair trade acknowledges that, if farmers are given the right direction, they will help protect the environment. But, the question is, why would someone who is so dependent on the nature surrounding them, destroy it? That is because, they are driven to do so by factors such as, low prices and unfair terms of trade and so, they see no other alternatives.

Animal Ethics

Animal products are used in the fashion industries for production where they make use of materials like wool, silk, leather, fur, etc. It is the large-scale industrial production that causes ethical issues, due to irresponsibility in animal welfare, where practices like plucking feathers from live ducks, ‘mulesing’, etc. are adopted.

‘Intentional Ethics’, also known as ‘Animal Rights View Ethics’ is a philosophy, that states that each individual, be it human or animal, has rights that should not be violated merely, for the satisfaction of oneself. On the other hand, it is believed that, animals can be used in industrial purposes – as labor or in production – but, with moderation and ensuring that, they are well treated and not harmed unnecessarily.

WILD Concept by the designer Marita Huurinainen, the only ethical fur and leather concept in the world, has come up with an innovative idea of utilizing a different fur resource than farmed ones. WILD Concept in cooperation with Finnish hunters, buys furs from the hunters, in order to prevent hunted animal furs from being wasted. This ethical approach of Marita, builds positivity in consumers as they know that, no animal has been suffered or killed solely, for use in fashion production.

TRANSPARENCY

Due to globalization, the global manufacturing systems have become complex and so; the need for transparency has become an essential part, for a sustainable fashion industry. Tracing the origin of the product has become difficult, as the production processes have been fragmented into various countries and supply chains. Yet, transparency is essential for creating value and gaining consumers’ trust, as the information on supply chain, suppliers and subcontracting partners is valuable for the consumers.

The company must ensure that, they give true and clear information of their sustainable and ethical practices, in the production of their product and must avoid the practices of greenwashing, otherwise they are more likely to lose the value and trust of the consumers of the product.

A perfect example is the company Patagonia that takes its sustainability principles, as a valuable strategy. The company offers information on its manufacturing locations worldwide and factories, they are collaborating with globally. All of this information is available for consumers, on Patagonia’s web pages.

Contracting

Most manufacturers do not handle the entire production of garment, in their own factories. Although, they are responsible for all the phases of manufacturing, from designing to selling the product, they may still be able to contract out some or all of the production. The main reason behind contracting is to reduce cost and maximize profit, without compromising on quality and time. As mentioned earlier, it is necessary to work closely with the contractor to make sure they act socially responsible and follow the code of conduct to assist the firm to incorporate sustainable practices in its production.

Often the fabric is purchased in one country, exported in another for sewing and shipped to third for selling. Contractors can be located anywhere in the world where there are labors with abundant, wages are reasonable and where - facilities like transportation, technology, etc. are available. Manufacturers have sourced their production to cheaper sources of labor in Asia, Eastern Europe, Mexico and the Caribbean. About 80% of clothing exports are shipped, to developing

economies from undeveloped countries.

In this vast, globalized supply network, the main concern is risk management. The dreadful event that took place in Bangladesh on 24th April 2013 gives us a lesson of what happens when a fashion industry fails to integrate sustainability in its production and supply chain.

Green Supply Chain Management

The supply chain is a network of retailers, distributors, transporters, storage facilities and vendors that participate in the production, delivery and sale of products. While green supply chain management integrates environmental thinking into supply chain management, including product design, material selection, sourcing and manufacturing processes, delivery of the final product to the consumers and management of the product after its useful life. Green supply chain management helps in value creation. It helps in offering maximum value to all stakeholders like consumers and employees' satisfaction, sustainable environment, better quality of life and also profitable for the business.

ECO-MARKETING

At times labels such as "fair trade" and "Eco" don't satisfy consumers on the quality of the garment in terms of either manufacture or fabric, and this is why some firms chose to use their own terminologies that are more precise and convincing on optimum quality.

For examples Gossypium chooses to market its clothes under the phrase: "Pure and Fair" Beyond Skin, shoemaker, uses slogans "cruelty-free" to expressing its animal friendliness and "vegetarian shoes" to convey their use of polyurethane (PU), instead of synthesized PVC and leather.

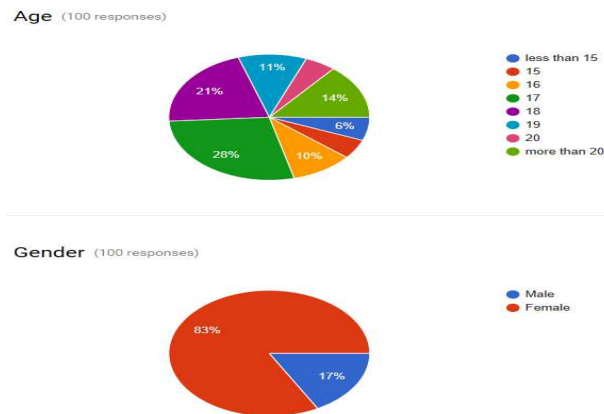
Although, these firms aim to differentiate themselves from other, less ethically oriented fashion brands and use their own slogans, it may also be confusing for the consumers to interpret what they are trying to convey. And though they are allowed to use their own stamps, it is not recognized as an official stamp guaranteeing its ethicality.

Marks and Spencer has been successful in raising awareness of its commitment to eco-fashion by introducing it alongside its existing one. This is well-known as "Plan A" which aims at sourcing responsibly, reducing waste and working to help the community.

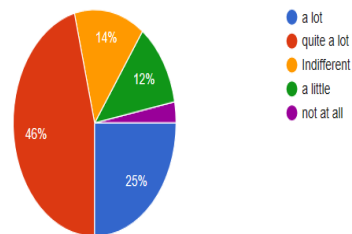
There are many specialist magazines, like Organic Life, the Ecologist, and many non-specialized national and local media too who have made a significant contribution in promoting eco-fashion. And with technology advances, social media has been used at its best to promote eco-friendly products and spread awareness of its importance too.

ANALYSIS

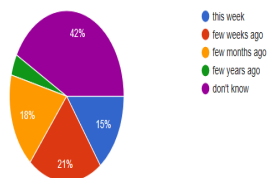
In order to better understand consumer attitude towards eco-fashion, the author carried out a short survey where data were collected from about a 100 respondents. The results are as follows:

**Figure 1**

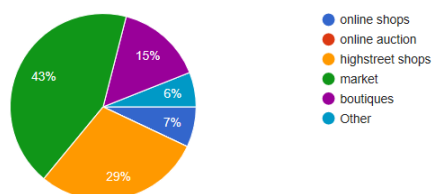
How much does the current state of the environment concern you? (Global warming etc)
(100 responses)

**Figure 2**

When was the last time you bought a product because it associated with a good cause?
(100 responses)

**Figure 3**

Where do you mostly purchase your clothes from? (100 responses)

**Figure 4**

How often do you purchase clothes? (100 responses)

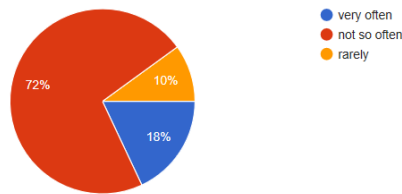


Figure 5

The fashion industry has one of the largest impacts on the environment. When you shop do you pay attention to sustainability factors (such as made by organic materials, fair trade or supporting NGO's)? (100 responses)

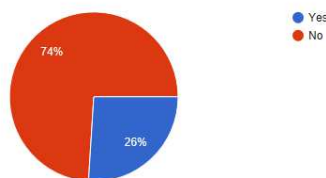


Figure 6

If eco-fashion was brought into more mainstream markets (ZARA etc) would you be more likely to buy it? (100 responses)

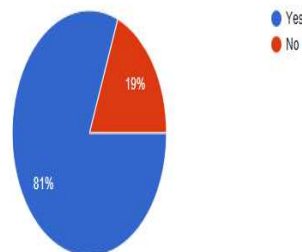


Figure 7

If you knew the brand you buy employs child labour, what would you do? (100 responses)

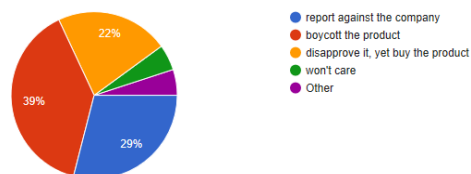


Figure 8

As most of the respondents were young adults, it can be assessed that although they are very keen to environmentalism, sustainability is not a term they would associate with fashion and neither do they make it their most dominant criteria in a purchase decision.

The problem is that firstly most people are not aware of the existence of eco-fashion, and so they don't realize that

it doesn't come for free. That is why half of the group is willing to pay only less than AED90. They aren't aware that it costs a firm a lot to produce ethically since employees have to be paid fairly; products need to be environmentally friendly, etc. But what can be done to increase awareness is start selling Eco garments in mainstream markets since that is the preferable purchasing ground for most. Although many say they would either report against the company or boycott the product if they knew it employed child labor, I feel it is quite impractical since it is a consumer habit to disapprove a product but not boycott it, especially if they gain high utility out of it.

The ethical fashion market is a niche market, constituting about 1 per cent of the global fashion industry. Fashion companies are moving towards responsible production, but consumers are less likely to engage in responsible consumption due to lack of knowledge and availability of ethical goods, higher prices, and misleading information about products. Therefore, it is the role of firms to communicate it through media, so that consumers are able to appreciate and adopt ethical values in their purchasing decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there has been progress in terms of awareness of ethical and sustainable production, there is still a long way to go. Now is the time when we need to start implementing these strategies worldwide. It is surely very costly to run any business, and so is a fashion business for that matter. Making ethical and sustainable choices will guarantee a successful business operation and increase a firm's profitability so they may be able to cover their costs in the long run.

There are various ethical strategies, of which few were discussed in this paper, for example, CSR, EPR, Eco label, transparency, etc. I believe if, even one of these strategies is to be adopted, it will make a huge difference and the business may sooner start seeing positive results. That's because, any ethical practice will always be appreciated by the society, which includes the potential consumers.

In countries where there is a lack of knowledge amongst consumers, on the environmental issues, it may not seem feasible for companies to adopt such environmental measures, and so, they may not integrate it into their product and production plan. Thus, it is necessary to increase environmental awareness in the society and the best way is, through education.

For new fashion professionals starting out, there is a great opportunity to build an ethical fashion industry. While, for existing fashion firms, particularly mainstream markets, such as Marks & Spencer, have an opportunity to assess their current practices and analyze how they can improve their product lines, to instill the principles of eco-fashion. In each of these cases, all fashion brands must be able to balance the needs of sustaining and growing an ethical business, while also rightly promoting their eco-fashion products, to encourage consumers to alter their purchasing habits.

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